



Locomotive and cars on HBR line.

Photo courtesy Manitoba Archives

THE HUDSON BAY RAILWAY



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THE HUDSON BAY RAILWAY

When agitation began in the 1870's for a provincial railway linking Winnipeg with a seaport on Hudson Bay, enthusiasts could summon two centuries of history to their cause. The first of three main access routes to the the settlement at the forks of the Red and Assiniboine, the Hudson Bay Route had drawn Indians, fur traders, adventurers and European settlers inland, and had provided continuous communication between the Red River Settlement and its metropolitan focus in Great Britain. Although the mid-nineteenth century had seen the Canadian Route, and the St. Paul or American Route to Red River take precedence, the Hudson Bay Route had remained a viable alternative.

When the growing maturity of the newly-formed Manitoba in the 1870's produced an increased desire for independence from the influences of Eastern Canada, as well as the United States, Red River once again looked northward to its direct link with Europe. The solution, to a people already under the influence of a continental railway boom, appeared simple: steel could be laid along the time-honoured Hudson Bay Route.

Simple this was not. It was 1929, after more than fifty years of business and political manoeuvring, economic depression, engineering difficulties, a rebellion and a world war, before the Hudson Bay Railway reached the Port of Churchill. In that time it had become a symbol of Manitoba's northward expansion and of her struggle for independence from the "Eastern interests" which appeared to dominate her development. It had also become a symbol of prairie desire to direct the nation's wheat economy, and of Canadian nationalist reaction to American "Manifest Destiny" to control the entire continent.

The investigations of Dr. Robert Bell, a Winnipeg geologist, physician and chemist, were largely responsible for creating a widespread public interest in the Hudson Bay route. His reports authorized by the Dominion Geological Survey between 1875 and 1880, contained a list of advantages which were to be repeated time and again by proponents of the scheme. From an economic point of view, the route, being shorter and requiring fewer transfers than its eastern rival, was cheaper. Grain and other exports could be shipped directly from the prairies to international markets in Liverpool. As wheat exports increased in importance, the prospect of reducing transportation costs by half and thereby doubling prairie income, became increasingly attractive. The immigration needed to develop the West could also be increased with the use of the direct route; immigrants coming by The Bay could not be diverted by American land agents or the lure of easily-accessible American Lands. It was also hoped that the creation of a Canadian port on the Bay would prevent American whalers from reaping considerable profits on the inland sea. These arguments had considerable appeal among nationalists apprehensive of American designs on Canadian territory, and gained for the Hudson Bay Railway an aura of national as well as regional concern.

As early as 1878, the Hudson Bay Railway acquired a political aspect. John Norquay's Conservative government came to power on a platform which included the extension of Manitoba's boundaries to the Bay, and development of internal communications within the province. The latter was commonly interpreted to include aid for the proposed Hudson Bay Railway.

In an attempt to fulfill these promises, Norquay approached Sir John A. Macdonald's federal government in the first of a long series of negotiations which seemed, from a Manitoba point of view, to place the Canadian Pacific Railway, the federal government (particularly the Conservatives) and "eastern interests," against the provincial government and western development. Macdonald, committed to the completion of the CPR, could not ignore arguments by Donald Smith and others that a northern line would compete to the detriment of the transcontinental railway. Nor could he ignore Western sentiment. Therefore, argues historian Howard Fleming,

Macdonald's policy in regard to the Bay route was consistent. He refused aid at

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times when such aid promised the successful completion of the road, and granted it when there was little likelihood of such aid carrying it to fruition. His policy permitted the Conservatives to claim Tory interest in the scheme without at the same time alienating the powerful support of the Canadian Pacific.

When the Dominion government upheld the CPR's monopoly clause preventing any competitive lines being built south of the transcontinental line, the Hudson Bay line to the north became firmly established as a symbol of prairie resentment against the CPR and its eastern control. Although disallowing the charter of a southern provincial railway, Macdonald approved two charters granted in 1880, one to the Montreal-based Nelson Valley Railway and Transportation Company to build a line from Lake Winnipeg to the mouth of the Churchill River, and the other to the Winnipeg-based Winnipeg and Hudson Bay Railway and Steamship Company, to build from Winnipeg to Port Nelson. Neither enjoyed the generous financial provisions given to the CPR, and competition between the two new companies further reduced their assets, until economic necessity forced a merger under the latter name in 1883. In 1887 it was changed to The Winnipeg and Hudson Bay Railway Company and in 1894 to the Winnipeg and Great Northern Railway Company. Led during the 1880's and 90's by Hugh McKay Sutherland of Winnipeg, and supported by popular sentiment (but little else), this company provided a continuing focus for interest in the Hudson Bay Railway.

Hugh Sutherland's attempts to obtain financing from the province, the Dominion and European banking houses, were frustrated by political manipulation, the 1885 Rebellion and the refusal of the Federal Department of Railways and Canals to co-operate on the project. Only forty miles of track were laid to Shoal Lake in 1886 before the scheme collapsed, never to be resumed along the interlake route.

The construction of these forty miles to nowhere brought into the picture the railway-building firm of Donald Mann and Herbert Holt, whose activities with partners James Ross and William McKenzie were to provide foundations for the railway empire of McKenzie and Mann.



Survey party portaging near Long Spruce Rapids.

Photo courtesy National Harbours Board.

Between 1896 and 1899, McKenzie and Mann effected an amalgamation of their recently acquired Lake Manitoba Railway and Canal Company with Sutherland's Winnipeg and Great Northern, under the name of the Canadian Northern Railway Company. This company built the first successful line in a north-westerly direction, reaching Dauphin in 1896, and Winnipegosis in 1897. They continued building westward to Prince Albert in subsequent years, but made one final contribution toward the Bay route, building a branch line from Hudson Bay Junction in Saskatchewan, to The Pas, Manitoba, in 1908.

Throughout this entire period the federal government had authorized repeated scientific investigations of the route's potential. Testimony in special Senate Committees, and expeditions over land and water continued to provide officials with conflicting information. It was generally agreed that engineering technology could handle the construction of a railway to the Bay, but it was feared that sea navigation would be a much greater problem. In dispute were the existence of a suitable harbour, the navigability of Hudson Strait, and the length of the ice-free season in the Bay and Straits.

By 1908, the potential of the Hudson Bay Route was receiving a wider acceptance than ever, and pressure for construction of an outlet on the Bay was mounting in the wheat economy. In that year, for the first time, both Liberal and Conservative parties made a firm commitment to the construction of the railway. Reflecting a rare degree of national consensus on the issue, Governor General Earl Grey, after a trip through the Bay, dubbed it the "Mediterranean" of Canada. In the midst of this enthusiasm, the Hudson Bay Railway became a public enterprise, to be financed by public funds.

The issue of a suitable harbour remained in dispute to the last. In 1912, after surveying possible routes to both Port Nelson and Fort Churchill, Nelson was selected, not for its harbourage but for its shorter and easier access. Between 1910 and 1918, a bridge was completed over the Saskatchewan River at The Pas and 214 miles of track were laid by a crew of several hundred men. When financial complications of World War I intervened, the railway had reached Kettle Rapids, and only 100 miles lay between the end of the line and the Port Nelson terminus. During this time, construction had also begun on port facilities. Construction was halted and materials for both track and port were diverted



Survey party on Nelson River.

Photo courtesy National Harbours Board.

to the Canadian National Railways, a government corporation formed from the collapsing McKenzie and Mann empire, and other bankrupt lines.

For several years very little happened to the Hudson Bay Railway. In 1924 it was placed under CNR management, but continued to suffer from insufficient maintenance. Frost, rotting ties and warped rails gradually rendered more and more of the track hazardous, until even the "Muskeg Special" carrying supplies to trappers and prospectors as far as Mile 214 was a weekly uncertainty. The annual consignment of rails for repairs was diverted to east-west lines in need of maintenance, and at one point, plans were made to tear up the steel beyond Mile 214 for use on other lines.

The mid-twenties experienced an upsurge in public opinion in favour of completing the railway. Agrarian unrest was increasing on the prairies, and farmers' determination to be free of the CPR's control of grain handling led them to demand the northern port once again. By this time the dramatic ore discoveries of Mandy, Flin Flon and Sherritt, coupled with increased interest in the pulp and paper, hydro-electric, marble and other resources of northern Manitoba, increased the desirability of the railway. In keeping with the spirit of the time, a group of 1,500 interested people, including some from the United States, met in Winnipeg on April 30, 1924, to form the "On To The Bay Association." They hoped as a pressure group free from the taint of political parties, to publicize their campaign and increase popular support. Probably more effective, however, was the Progressive bloc in Parliament, upon which Mackenzie King's minority government was depending for support. When the Progressives called for the completion of the railway in 1925, King found it necessary to consent. In 1926, a parliamentary vote removed the Hudson Bay Railway from CNR management, and placed it directly under the Department of Railways and Canals. Churchill, because of its natural harbour, replaced Port Nelson as the designated terminus at the recommendation of Frederick Palmer, an English civil engineer. The final push for tidewater began.

While attention has long been paid to these political machinations, historians are only now turning to the astonishing feat of human labour which made the Hudson Bay Railway possible. One of the first northern lines on the continent, it led surveyors, engineers and workmen across terrain which defied the modern mechanical grading equipment and steam shovels. The sinking holes of muskeg which could swallow large sections of roadbed and track, and the permafrost which could not be excavated, made manpower the essential ingredient. As with most Canadian railway construction, the HBR was built with immigrant labour. Newly arrived immigrants from Russia, Eastern Europe, Scandinavia and Western Europe, as well as Canadians and Americans, were drawn to the northern frontier to work long days and weeks on isolated stretches of "The Barrens," living all the while in crowded camps, withstanding the inevitable northern scourges of frost, blizzards and insects, for a wage which usually did not cover the cost of board and room.

In its last phase, the Hudson Bay Railway was particularly indebted to its immigrant workmen. A crew of 3,000 men, mostly Swedes, Russians, Belgians and Finns, under the direction of Claude Johnson, a C.N.R. engineer, laid 300 miles of track between 1924 and 1929. Pick, shovel and wheelbarrow were their main instruments. Track was laid on the last sixty miles of muskeg during the winter of 1928-29, and the gravel bed dumped under it the following summer. On April 3, 1929, the railway (without its roadbed) reached Churchill, and the last spike, wrapped in tinfoil from a tobacco package, was driven to symbolize completion. On September 13, the bed was completed and the Hudson Bay Railway was ready for use by the CNR.

With the coming of the railway, the townsite of Churchill was laid out, and Port Nelson installations were transferred to the northern port. A huge grain elevator and wharves were built. In September, 1931, all buildings completed, the Hudson Bay Route was officially declared open.

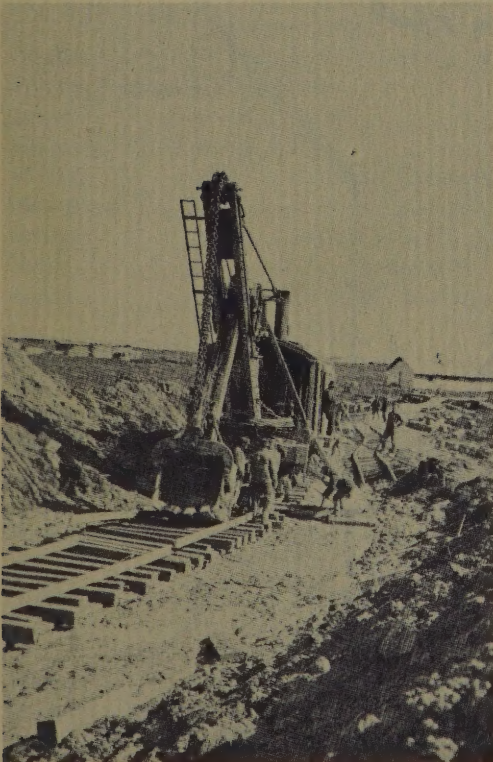
Unfortunately, the high expectations of the Hudson Bay Railway have not been fulfilled. As yet it has not become the major transportation route for western produce. It has, however, been instrumental in the development of northern mineral and timber resources, carrying people and supplies to, and raw materials from, areas not otherwise accessible. The Town of Churchill, developed around the grain elevators and harbour facilities, has become a focal point in the administration and development of the north. In short, the Hudson Bay Railway has been instrumental in ensuring that Manitoba continues to recognize her substantial northern dimension.

Bibliography for further reading:

Readily available published sources on the Hudson Bay Railway are very rare. For a brief narrative on the subject, see Leonard F. Earl's essay, "The Hudson Bay Railway," published in the **Transactions of the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba**, Series III, No. 14 (1958-59), 24-32. More comprehensive is Howard A. Fleming, **Canada's Arctic Outlet, A History of the Hudson Bay Railway**, published by the University of California Press in 1957. A history of interest in the route, entitled **The Hudson Bay Road, 1498-1915**, by the editor of The Pas Herald, A. H. de Tremaudan, was published in New York, 1916. The physical feat of construction is outlined in some detail in an article by J. L. Charles, "Railways March Northward," **Canadian Geographical Journal**, January, 1961, p. 17.

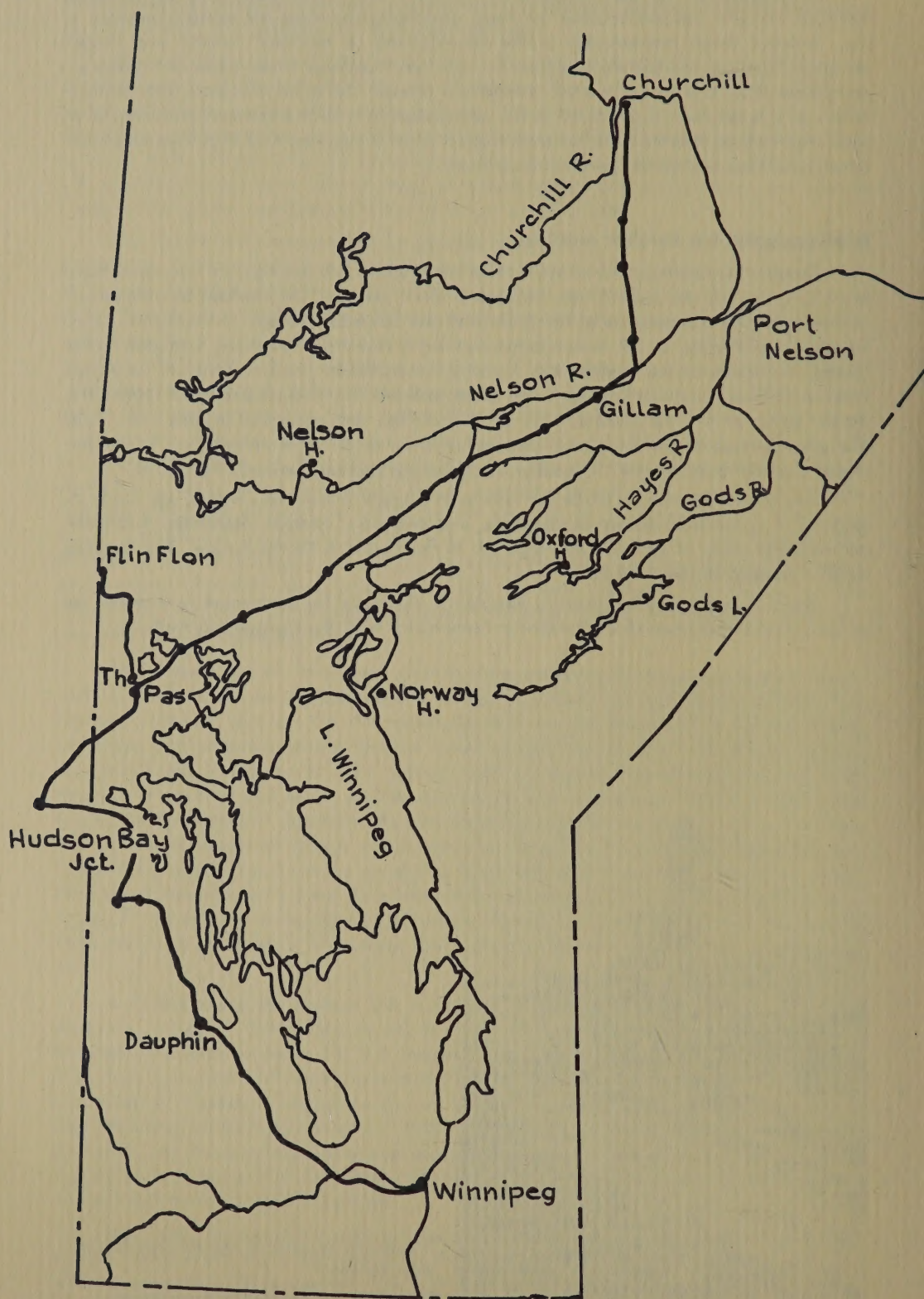
For general reading to place the railway in a larger provincial context, see James A. Jackson, **A Centennial History of Manitoba**, and William L. Morton, **Manitoba: A History**. An excellent study of northern development in this period is Morris Zaslow, **The Opening of the Canadian North, 1870-1914**.

Special credit must be given to Beatrice A. Frederick for permission to examine her as yet unpublished research on the labour force which built the Hudson Bay Railway.



Steam shovel used to dig the road bed at Port Nelson.

Photo courtesy National Harbours Board.



Stations from The Pas to Churchill:

The Pas	
Tremaudin	— A. H. de Tremaudin, founder of The Pas Herald.
Orok	— Dr. R. D. Orok, physician to HBR crew and first legislative representative for The Pas.
Atikimeg	— local lake.
Finger	— Herman Finger, pioneer lumberman at The Pas.
Budd	— Rev. Henry Budd, Cree Anglican missionary.
Halcrow	— Gideon Halcrow, HBC officer 1871-1920.
Cormorant	— local lake.
Dering	—
Rawebb	— Ralph H. Webb, mayor of Winnipeg.
Dyce	— village in Scotland.
Paterson	— General Paterson, Pres. of On-To-The-Bay Association.
Wekusko	— local lake.
Turnbull	— Thomas Turnbull, engineer on CNR, Winnipeg.
Tyrell	— Joseph Burr Tyrell and James William Tyrell.
Ponton	— Dominion Land Surveyor in Manitoba.
Button	— Sir Thomas Button, Welsh explorer in Hudson Bay, 1612.
Dunlop	— W. D. Dunlop, Yorkton, Saskatchewan.
Pipun	— Cree word for "Winter".
Wabowden	— W. A. Bowden, chief engineer, Dept. of Railways & Canals.
Medard	— Medard des Groseilliers, trader with Radisson in Hudson Bay.
Lyddal	— William Lyddal, Governor of HBC, 1670.
Odhill	— O. D. Hill, K.C., Barrister, Melfort, Saskatchewan.
Earchman	— Hudson Bay Railway Engineer.
La Prouse	— French Admiral who captured Fort Prince of Wales from Samuel Hearne, 1782.
Hockin	— Captain C. H. Hockin, NWMP, killed by Almighty Voice, 1897.
Thicket Portage	— local name.
Leven	— local name.
Sipiwesk	— local lake.
Matago	— Cree word for "Limestone".
Pikwitonei	— local river — Cree word meaning "Scabby face".
Bridgar	— John Bridgar — HBC officer, Fort Nelson.
Wilde	— Sgt. B. Wilde, NWMP.
Arnot	— William Arnot, in charge of Hudson Bay Railway water supply for 14 years.
Stitt	—
Boyd	—
Pit Siding	— descriptive name.
Munck	— Jens Munck, Danish explorer in Hudson Bay, 1619.
Split Lake	— local name.
Ilford	— Ilford, England. Named at request of Sir Frederick Wise, M.P.
Nonsuch	— HBC ship, 1668.
Wivenhoe	— HBC ship, 1670.
Willbeach	— William Beach.
Luke	— Luke Clemens, mail carrier and trader along railway. Nephew of Mark Twain.
Gillam	— Zachary Gillam, British American from Boston, Captain of Nonsuch.
Kettle Rapids	— local name.
Jacam	— J. A. Campbell, first Commissioner of the North for Manitoba.
Bird	— M.P. for Nelson.

Amery	— Rt. Hon. L. C. M. S. Amery, Secretary of State.
Charlebois	— Rt. Rev. Ovide Charlebois, Bishop of Keewatin.
Weir River	— local.
Lawledge	— F. M. Lawledge, engineer on original HBR survey.
Thibaudeau	— First Dominion Surveyor on HBR, 1900.
Herchmer	— Commissioner Lawrence Herchmer, RCMP.
Kellet	— Capt. Henry Kellet, CB of RHM Resolute, explored Banks Island, 1852-54.
O'Day	— J. E. O'Day, engineer of construction from Amery to Churchill.
Back	— George Back, Royal Navy, with Franklin, 1819-22.
McClintock	— Capt. F. L. McClintock, R.N., sailed with Lady Franklin's yacht, The Fox, in search of Franklin, 1857-59.
Belcher	— Capt. Edward Belcher, C.B., HMS Assistance, sailed Wellington Channel, 1852-54.
Cromarty	— HBC Factor, Fort Severn.
Chesnaye	— Albert de la Chesnaye — merchant and fur trader, Quebec, 1679, organized the "Company of the North".
Lamprey	— Munck's ship.
Bylot	— Robert Bylot, Captain of Discovery, sailed with Hudson, Button and Foxe.
Digges	— English merchant — one of Hudson's financiers.
Tidal	— point to which tide runs up Churchill River.
Churchill	— Fort Churchill named for Sir John Churchill, Governor, HBC.



Luke Clemens, guide to survey parties north of Mile 214.

Photo courtesy National Harbours Board.



Track laying machine on the Hudson Bay Railway, 1920.

Photo courtesy Manitoba Archives



Laying track across Armstrong Lake, 1925.

Photo courtesy Manitoba Archives



Cutting ties at Thicket Portage, 1918.

Photo courtesy Manitoba Archives



A railway hand car with platform extended to carry crew, passengers, baggage, mail and other freight, was used on the line between Hudson Bay Junction and The Pas in the summer of 1909. Since the new track to The Pas was unfit to carry a train, this car was the only transportation in and out of The Pas that summer. The trip took two days with everybody taking turns at the pumping. A sail could be hoisted to take advantage of the wind. Passengers: Inspector Herchmer, RCMP; an Indian member of the crew, Captain H. H. Ross, Charles Denby of Winnipegosis, Mrs. Walter Munday, another crew member, Miss E. Nichols and William Carrierre.

Photo courtesy Manitoba Archives.

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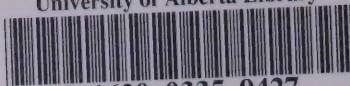
THE HUDSON BAY RAILWAY

The Hudson Bay Railway was actively proposed in the 1870's to provide the West with a direct route to Europe. A charter was issued in 1881 but political and financial difficulties prevented immediate construction.

In 1908, the Canadian Northern Railway built a line to The Pas. The Canadian Government then assumed responsibility, reaching Kettle Rapids before Wartime financial problems intervened. Canadian National Railways then carried trappers' supplies on the weekly "Muskeg Special" only to Mile 214 (Pikwitonei). In response to pressures from the West, the Government made a final effort to reach the Bay. A crew of 3,000 working with pickaxe and wheelbarrow on the frozen muskeg, brought the railway to Churchill on March 29, 1929.

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We have received great gifts as our heritage in Canada — beautiful rivers and parks, rolling hills, trees and grassland; the rich resources of nature are ours to protect, cherish and enjoy.

Wherever man has been, there are marks of defilement and destruction — let us resolve that this shall not be our legacy to the twenty-first century. Let us rather honour and emulate those who went before us as pioneers, who gave of themselves, building and creating, enriching the land. They have earned our thanks, and while we cannot repay them, we can respect their achievements and resolve that we will try to follow them in action and in attitude.

For this we set aside this special place in our Province as a site that is part of history.